The Dictator Novel in the Age of Trump

"Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control, they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit." Chinua Achebe

Of the thousand and one reactions of horror and shock following the illegitimate victory and first months of the Trump administration, one of the most interesting variations I have heard is: "at least there will be good art." The hypothesis is that dangerous political years inspire greater art than do times of relative safety. That this is an unverifiable consolation distracts from the obvious point: Why can't we have good art and good politics?

The Dictator in Context

The installation of Trump as president has prompted endless historical comparisons to various dictators and fascists. As I previously argued here, I firmly believe that Trump hews closely to many of the methods, if not always the ideology (it is apparent that Trump has no agenda beyond his self-aggrandizement), of what Umberto Eco labeled "*ur*-Fascism. Even before the emergence of Trump I wrote of how the Republican Party's rejection of democratic principles was ultimately a road to fascism. The difficulty in such definitions is that, like unhappy families, dictators, tyrants, and fascists are all infelicitous in their own unique ways. I would still argue that Trump shares certain characteristics and methods with Mussolini, Idi Amin, and yes, Hitler (this is a serious and relevant historical parallel rather than an *ad hominem* attack, thus Godwin's Law does not apply). On the other hand, Trump is also different from every other past dictator since, to give one example, he rose from outside the military or political

ranks and was merely a failed businessman and con man who played the reality TV character of a successful businessman. Trump's peculiar brand of power politics is *sui generis*, but our understanding of the Trump phenomenon is very clearly rooted in our reading of history and literature.

While it is necessary to explore the parallels to Trump in American history (the closest are Andrew Jackson, whose portrait Trump placed in the Oval Office, and of course Nixon) and European history (there are many; regarding Italian politics, to give but one example, a mixture of Mussolini and Silvio Berlusconi seems apt), I think the most appropriate family resemblance to Trump is found in the Latin American *caudillo*, or charismatic strongman. The reasons for this include: 1) personal enrichment as the only constant and coherent ideology, 2) the need for constant praise and adulation, 3) the exaggerated chauvinism, misogyny and virility, 4) the carefully controlled image, 5) the promotion of family members and cronies to key political positions, 6) the claims of a singular ability to interpret the "people's will", 7) the appropriation of kitsch over culture, 8)the use of the epithet "enemies of the state" for anyone who criticizes or opposes his will, 9) the total disregard of all existing democratic values and institutions, as well as 10) disdain for writers and intellectuals of every stripe (who are always among the first to be persecuted). Many of these traits overlap with more overt right-wing or left-wing ideological positions held by dictators in modern history, but all depend solely on authoritarianism for the sake of power itself rather than any particular ideology. Of course, there are ways that Trump differs from the typical *caudillo*, such as lack of a popular nickname (the Chief, the Supreme, Generalissimo, etc.) and a glaring lack of exquisitely adorned military uniforms (give him time, though—he might come around). The cult of personality that is another universal trait of *caudillismo* easily lends itself to each individual dictator giving his name to the political system, *i.e.* Peronism, Trujillism,

Trumpism, Chavism, etc, and requiring personal loyalty to the dictator himself over any other abstract value like the constitution, the laws, or the welfare of the people. The various labels of dictator, tyrant, despot, strongman, autocrat, autarch, president for life, and the corresponding adjectives for the type of government (authoritarian, totalitarian, kleptocratic, oligarchic, etc.) are all, in my opinion, synonyms differing only in context and nuance. The phenomenon of the *caudillo* is always located in an American (in the general sense of the Western hemisphere) context, and has a history in almost every Latin American country going back 200 years to when Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín threw off the Spanish yoke.

The Myth of the Benevolent Dictator

Are there any upsides to being ruled by a dictator? There is an old chestnut that says “at least Mussolini got the trains to run on time”. This is probably more propaganda than historical fact, even though he certainly did drain the swamps around Rome (finishing a plan drawn up by the Emperor Claudius). Hitler is sometimes given credit for the Autobahn. Stalin gets credit for…(let me get back to you on that one). In fact, it is inevitable that the apologists of any dictatorship will cite the improvement of public infrastructure and massive building projects, as well as the order, stability, and national sovereignty such regimes bring. There is a lot of truth to these claims. After all, even a budding dictator of below average intelligence (like Trump) would quickly figure out that he (because always men) needs to supplement constant state-run propaganda with big visual signs of progress to pacify and distract the little people under his thumb. Likewise with order and stability—if these are the highest ideals of a regime, they are relatively easy to enact by empowering the secret police and suppressing all individual freedoms.

Another occasional positive side effect of dictators is the unilateral protection of the environment, seen for example in the Dominican Republic under the arch-*caudillo* Rafael Trujillo and his authoritarian-leaning successor, Joaquín Balaguer (Jared Diamond discussed the latter in depth in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*). Is stopping deforestation and pollution and aggressively protecting natural areas worth tolerating autocratic rule? I think not, especially since we can achieve those goals democratically (as the countries of northern Europe and Costa Rica demonstrate). However practical or progressive a dictator may be in one particular facet of governance, there are always mountains of horrors piled up on the opposite side, clearly disproving the notion that it is ever beneficial for the host country to be under the dictator's heel. Have there ever been any historical instances of a mostly benevolent dictator?

In the original practice of the Roman Republic, a dictator was summoned only during the most urgent national crises and given complete control of the military and government, but only for six months. This temporal limitation seems like the best way to ward off the universal corruption of power. Kemal Ataturk was the father of the modern Turkish state, liberating it from European militaries after World War One and ushering in centuries worth of reforms in a couple decades. I ranked him here as an overall beneficial dictator, doing the best for his country, with few downsides (one-party rule, authoritarianism) that could not be avoided in that context. Even more exemplary is Giuseppe Garibaldi, the superhumanly heroic leader of Italian Unification. He led from the front in hundreds of battles and dozens of wars over 50 years, always in the name of freedom and what we would today call "human rights". In his most famous and important campaign, he singlehandedly conquered the southern half of Italy with 1000 men and a few rusty carbines, ruled as a dictator (when the word was still used in the Roman sense) for six months instituting many reforms, before voluntarily handing power to the new king of

Italy in the name of national unity, and retiring to farm on his private island. The hardest thing to get right in any transition from dictatorship to democracy is the peaceful transfer of power. That is why early Roman dictators like Cincinnatus, who gave up power and returned to his *latifundia*, or George Washington, who chose to finish his life as a civilian farmer instead of serving as president-king for life, are so celebrated by later generations (even though Cincinnatus was also violently opposed to the plebian reforms, and Washington was also a slave-owner). It is rare in the annals of history to find leaders uncorrupted by power, or who give up absolute power willingly. That is why the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting the president to two terms, is so important, and why, at a minimum, there should be term limits for every executive office in every country. Only when a precedent for this has been set in a country can it begin to dream of a time without dictators.

Trump the Would-be Dictator

Trump's open disdain and flagrant assault on hallowed democratic principles like the rule of law, separation of powers, an independent judiciary, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press is a deeply disturbing spectacle which clearly demonstrates his authoritarianism. Most dictators have their own particular brand, and Trump uses a strange mix of hyper-partisan, hyper-individualistic, privatized pseudo-fascism that prizes winning (though not necessarily violence) as the highest good, and total humiliation for those who are not "winners". Not exactly Nazi rhetoric, but there is a family resemblance. Dictatorships do not happen overnight. There is a strong case to be made that America has been creeping towards authoritarianism for 40 years, and thus the reasons for the installation of Trump are many and varied (and have little to do with his skills as a politician). Kitsch, another universal trait of totalitarian regimes, is a powerful tool to control and subvert real independent thinking with

sentimentality. Milan Kundera famously discussed the role of kitsch in the Communist bloc in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, saying: "When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme." Mike Carson has argued on this website how ubiquitous kitsch is in American society. Maximillian Alvarez has written that even my identification of Trump as a fascist can be seen as a type of counterproductive cathartic use of kitsch.

- Trump "the Winner"

No matter the underlying causes of the illegitimate Trump election, even an openly authoritarian president backed by a cowardly Congress cannot unilaterally dismantle 240 years of republican government. Therefore, there are still reasons to be hopeful about the outcome of this constitutional crisis. One is the incompetence and corruption of Trump and his administration. Their conspicuous weaknesses will prevent them from accomplishing some policy goals, and could sooner or later lead to impeachment. Another is the unprecedented unpopularity of Trump (almost every dictator had authentic claims to mass popular support at least in the early years, something Trump certainly lacks) and the highly energized resistance movement by the majority of Americans that will in turn greatly reduce this aspiring tyrant's capacity to subvert the U.S. Constitution. This counts not only for the big-ticket marches, protests, and lawsuits, but even for a more profound reawakening to the values of civic participation in civil society, and widespread grassroots involvement in things like discussion circles, teach-ins, and reading groups. Indeed, the burgeoning interest and sales of classic dystopian novels like *1984*, *The Plot Against America*, *It Can't Happen Here*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to name four of the most famous, is a sign of these troubled times. As important and relevant as these English language novels are, I would argue that there is a

less well-known but even more relevant genre: the Dictator Novel.

The Dictator Novel

The *novela de dictadore* is a sub-genre with wholly Latin American roots, and drawing on the long history of *caudillismo* in the former Spanish American Empire. Most of these countries have spent many more years as dictatorships than democracies, and by my rough count there are at least 50 examples in Latin American history of strongmen (yes, all men, though Eva Peron comes the closest to being a strongwoman; it is actually unsurprising that I cannot find any examples of female dictators in world history). The development of the Dictator Novel was a reaction by the writers of Latin America to the endless parade of *caudillos* preying on their people like wolves guarding flocks of sheep. The first example is the 1845 novel *Facundo* by Domingo Sarmiento, which is a criticism of Juan Manuel de Rosas of Argentina, the first major *caudillo* and a model for many subsequent ones. The sub-genre became especially popular since the Latin American Literary Boom of the 1960's and 70's.

Mario Vargas Llosa's 2000 novel *The Feast of the Goat* recounts the horrific totalitarian regime of Rafael "el Jefe" Trujillo, who made the Dominic Republic into his personal fiefdom from 1930-1961. Vargas Llosa, a master storyteller who won the 2010 Nobel Prize for Literature, was also a political activist who ran for president of Peru in 1990. He is therefore well-placed to write about politics and dictators in Latin America. I first encountered the horrors of the Trujillo regime via Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which I would consider a semi-dictator novel, about how the protagonist is the recipient of a multi-generational curse caused by the rapaciousness (literal and figurative) of Generalissimo Trujillo.

Vice President Nixon and Rafael “the Chief” Trujillo in 1958.

The Feast of the Goat is concurrently told from three perspectives each revolving around Trujillo’s last day before being assassinated. One part is told by Urania Cabral, the daughter of a disgraced official of Trujillo who visits the Dominican Republic for the first time in 35 years. One part recounts the harrowing tale of the conspirators who kill Trujillo and seek to evade capture and torture. The final part enters in the mind of Trujillo himself as he goes through every minute of his final day, interrogating and humiliating ministers, while also revealing his own most humiliating secrets to the reader.

The main character, Urania Cabral, tells her family the story of why she never returned to the Dominican Republic, ending in a harrowing climax at the long-dead dictator’s country mansion: “I don’t think the word ‘kitsch’ existed yet…Years later, whenever I heard it or read it, and knew what extremes of bad taste and pretension it expressed, Mahogany House always came to mind. A kitsch monument.” The tyrant’s horrors reach deep, and continue to haunt long after death.

Trujillo was certainly one of the most prototypical of the caudillos, both by his beliefs and his actions. At one point Vargas Llosa’s version of Trujillo says: “I don’t have time to read the bullshit intellectuals write. All those poems and novels. Matters of state are too demanding.” Then later, echoing every dictator ever, he says to Balaguer, his puppet president and unbeknownst successor: “I’ve always had a low opinion of intellectuals and writers. On the scale of merit, the military occupy first place… Then the campesinos…Then the bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, businessmen. Writers and intellectuals come last. Even below the priests. You’re an exception, Dr. Balaguer. But the rest of them! A pack of

dogs." That these words were put into the Generalissimo's mouth by a notable writer and intellectual is part of the irony. One can easily imagine Trump expressing the same sentiment, if much less coherently and eloquently.

One of the most nightmarish aspects of living under a dictator is the vague idea that his reign will never end, or will swallow up entire generations like Saturn devouring his children, rendering the future well-nigh hopeless. This is the central theme of the 1975 dictator novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature and the most esteemed Latin American writer. In an unnamed country, the unnamed Patriarch has been the sole ruler for nearly 200 years. The novel is a poetic meditation on the dangers and solitude of absolute power. At the beginning, the superannuated tyrant's corpse in found in the presidential palace, but his allies, the people, and finally the reader, are led to wonder if this is really the unimaginable death of the eternal leader, or merely one more of his ruses to root out enemies and tighten his stranglehold on power. Absolute power is absolutely corrupting, and frightening to imagine. The lengths to which the dictator must go in order to gain and hold power for decades always leads inexorably to a regime of terror and torture. The Patriarch reminisces about past actions he has taken to defeat one of his foes or increase the awe of the people, but the narrative is not explicit about the details of this dark-side regime. Vargas Llosa's novel is a much more straightforward prose account of such a regime, while García Márquez's deals more obliquely and poetically with the nightmare of a never-ending totalitarian ruler.

There are a great many dictator novels, just a few more of which I will mention. The Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos wrote *I, the Supreme* (1974) about the first dictator of Paraguay, Dr. Francia (whom Adrian Bonenberger has written about on this website here). Dr. Francia was a populist despot

who isolated his country from the outside world, both for trade and immigration, and cracked down on all political opposition and criticism (sound familiar?). Bastos' novel is widely considered an attack on the Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled for 35 years over a repressive regime and forbid the Bastos to return to Paraguay after the novel's publication.

Simon Bolivar, "the Liberator"

García Márquez wrote a second dictator novel, *The General in His Labyrinth* (1989), about the last month of Simón Bolivar, the Liberator of South America whose rule once extended to Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Bolívar has most often been treated as a universal and mythical hero, a portrayal that García Márquez does away with. He shows the Liberator with all his defects, dying prematurely, scheming for a return to power, howling about betrayals by his enemies. It is a powerful meditation on power and death. Likewise, Vargas Llosa wrote another dictator novel, the monumental *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), which describes life in Peru during the dictatorship of Manuel Odría.

While the Dictator Novel has its roots in Latin American history, its impact has spread to other continents. Two examples from Africa are Chinua Achebe's 1987 *Anthills of the Savannah*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 2006 *Wizard of the Crow*. Both of these novels are excellent works of fiction from two of the most eminent African writers, showing both the horror and black humor that can paradoxically be found in the dictator's regime. Like the *caudillo*, the typical African strongman also has a love for buffoonish uniforms, which is possibly the only thing separating Trump from their ranks.

One final aspect of the dictator novel is the constant

presence and impact of United States imperialism, whether implicit or explicit. Insofar as the U.S. does intervene in Latin American politics, it is virtually always by means of the C.I.A. and its bag of dirty tricks. For example, the precariousness of the last two years of Trujillo's regime before his assassination can be directly attributed to loss of American patronage, C.I.A. agitation and material support for the assassins, and threat of invasion by the Marines. Trujillo, originally trained by the Marines himself, always considered himself the United States' strongest supporter in the Western Hemisphere, and was long treated by the Americans as an important and reliable bulwark against Communism. It is either ironic or just sad that the same organization that is responsible for propping up so many dictators and overthrowing or assassinating so many others in the name of "American interests", is now one of the principle means of stopping the new would-be American dictator. If Trump had read any dictator novels (even though he is functionally illiterate), he might have been able to understand that waging a war on the entire press as well as the many powerful intelligence communities is the wrong way to consolidate power. It is a war that he will lose decisively, we can be sure, but Trump's bungling experiment in tyranny have exposed the flaws in the American political system, possibly paving the way for future exploitation by a younger and much more competent aspiring dictator. From now one, we must always be on guard, never taking for granted the inevitable survival of our democratic principles, and never forgetting the lessons of historical and literary cautionary tales.

Conclusion

There is something very disturbing, for me and millions of others, in the fact that we are veering towards an outcome we have been warned against by our literary prophets (not to mention our reading of history), and it is a message people are taking seriously. Two plus two is four, the emperor has no

clothes, and the dictator is neither omnipotent nor immortal. For all the comparisons to the Nazi rise to power, one advantage we have as historical latecomers is our awareness of the past, our vigilance against a Reichstag fire-type event, and our will to resist the encroachment of the totalitarian dystopias we have read about. The power of the pen is real—satire and mockery of dictators are some of the best ways for writers to fight for freedom, as is the relentless reportage of the truth for journalists. I do not believe that all art is or should always be political. The artist is free to transcend or vie with the bounds of politics and history in her own search for beauty and meaning. However, there are times when, as Hannah Arendt said about 1933, it is no longer possible to be indifferent. We are living in one of those times when no one, including the artist, can afford to be indifferent.

New Fiction from "The Midnight Man" by David Eric Tomlinson

The Midnight Man book cover design by Sylvia McArdle.

The sousetrap north of the courthouse is one of those expensive, contrived places doing its best to look like a dive—sawdust on the floor, animal pelts on the walls,

microbrews on tap—and its patrons have the long-suffering air of parolees waiting out a sentence. Ingrid, the bartender, is a waifish hipster with an obvious piercing problem and a Wile E. Coyote tattoo peek-a-booing from her shirtsleeves, the once purple dye-job in her pageboy haircut paled partway to gray. When Dean bellies up to the bar she takes one look at him and pours off two shots of well whiskey, casually clinking the glasses onto a cocktail napkin placed under his nose.

“On the house.”

“I’m good.”

She turns back to the television balanced on the bar flap. “If you could see your face.”

“Really, I’m okay. Just waiting for someone.”

“Trust me mister, the one thing you are *not* right now is okay. Those two’ll get you closer to fine.”

Posted behind the carefully antiqued liquor display, tacked amongst the handbills wallpapering the corkboard paneling, is an oversized poster of a puckish Crash Lambeau in three-quarter profile, one eyebrow arched conspiratorially into the camera:

BIG GOVERNMENT IS WATCHING . . .
ARE YOU LISTENING?
WEEKDAYS, KTOK—AM 1000

Dean shouldn’t be here. There are rules about interacting with a witness once the trial has started. Some people might say this is tampering. But there is a thread he has yet to pull all the way through. And it has to do with more than just this case. In what feels like an ancient gesture he cradles one of the whiskeys, rolling it slowly between his palms.

The first two whiskeys burn going down. Dean orders two more.

While Ingrid preps the shots she says, “From here on out you pay your own way.”

There is an empty booth nearby and as he carries the drinks over to it Lambeau’s eyes seem to follow, tracking Dean’s every movement. The TV is tuned, just like every third set in town, to the O.J. Simpson spectacle in Los Angeles. A week or so ago, in what has turned out to be that trial’s most captivating exchange to date, LAPD detective Mark Fuhrman denied using the dreaded n-word. And now, whenever the networks have dead air that needs filling, footage of Fuhrman’s testimony can be seen looping as split-screen accompaniment to the pundit of the moment.

When Aura arrives she stands silhouetted in the doorway, as though bent on some official or even malignant business. Dean waves her over. She has just come from court and looks great in her gray suit and heels. She slides into the seat across from his.

“What are we drinking?”

“Bourbon.” He nudges a drink across the tabletop. “I’m sorry about how Wolfman treated you up there last week.”

“Wolfman?”

“Sorry. Paxton. We all have nicknames in the office.”

She lifts her glass. “To surviving this trial.”

“To surviving.”

They drink. Aura hides her grimace with the back of a hand, eyes shining. “Still running?”

“Every day.”

“I don’t know anybody who does that anymore.”

“I might be burning out. I used to get into this zone, a kind

of endorphin dream…”

“I know all about the zone.”

“…where I’d picture this invisible-type barrier between myself and the finish. Or the world, the future. Whatever.”

“It doesn’t have to compute. You were in the zone.”

“Right, so you get it. Well for the rest of that run, my job was to push through the barrier. To see what was on the other side.”

“What was it?”

“That’s the thing. I never broke through.”

“I hope you haven’t asked me here to decipher your dreams.”

He chuckles. “You did a good job against Wolfman.”

“I thought the D.A. was about to shoot your boss.”

“We’d have some hope of winning if he’d gone ahead and done it.” Dean flashes the high sign to Ingrid and she pours two more whiskeys but makes him fetch them himself, which he does. Walking back from the bar he can hear F. Lee Bailey grilling detective Mark Fuhrman: “*…use the word BLEEEEP! in describing people?*”

He’s settling back into the booth when she says, “What’s yours?”

“What’s my what?”

“Your nickname.”

“Tonto.”

Her disappointed face.

“I know,” he winces.

They hear "*…Not that I recall, no*."

"Carl wasn't a monster," Aura says.

"Neither is Billy."

"*You mean if you called someone a BLEEEEP! you have forgotten it?*"

Aura is trying hard to ignore the television.

"The way you talk about Carl, the way your boss does. It isn't the Carl I remember. This isn't the truth of him."

"A trial has very little to do with truth."

"There are these things called facts."

"Facts aren't sufficient for getting at the truth. We're about to see a whole boatload of facts in the next few weeks. And in a perfect world they would all be true. But we don't live in a perfect world. If Wolfman wanted to, or if Macy did, he could hire an expert witness to testify that two plus two equals five. And everyone, basically, would believe him."

"You're exaggerating."

"In my experience, the argument with the least amount of untruth in it is usually the winner. And that's the best anybody can hope for."

"The least amount of untruth. Wow."

"*I want you to assume that perhaps at some time since 1984 or 1985, you addressed a member of the African American race as a BLEEEEP! Is it possible that you have forgotten that act on your part?*"

"They can't execute Billy Grimes without you," says Dean. "If a family member asks the jury for mercy, most times they'll grant it."

“Your boss tells me I’m responsible for Carl’s death. You say I’m responsible for this Billy kid’s life. You two give me too much credit.”

“Answer me this. If Billy gets the death chamber, who’s responsible?”

“How about Billy is?”

“Nice. But it’s out of his hands now.”

“So the district attorney.”

“No. First he has to present the evidence. Then he needs a jury to decide the case.”

“So the jury then.”

“All twelve of them?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. But no. Someone has to carry out the sentence.”

“So the warden.”

“No. He needs someone to administer the injection.”

“So the executioner or doctor or whoever.”

“Which one?”

“What?”

Dean holds up three fingers. “There are three executioners.”

“…*you say under oath that you have not addressed any black person as a BLEEEEP! or spoken about black people as BLEEEEP! in the past ten years, Detective Fuhrman?*”

“Each of them stands behind a cinder-block wall, finger on a button. They wear Halloween masks to hide their faces. And

after Billy's last words everyone will push his button and head happily back home for dinner, secure in the knowledge that he probably wasn't the one who killed the prisoner."

"So nobody is responsible," Aura says.

"This is the genius of capital punishment. Nobody feels responsible because the responsibility is spread so thin. But the genius has a weakness. They can't do it without you, Aura. During the victim impact testimony you don't just speak for Carl. As far as the jury is concerned, you *are* Carl."

"Stop saying my brother's name, Tonto."

"Billy has a son. A son who loves him."

"I heard," she sighs. "Are they going to make him testify?"

"There'll be no point. After Willa has testified, after Billy's cellmate does . . ."

"*So that anyone who comes to this court and quotes you as using that word in dealing with African Americans would be a liar, would they not, Detective Fuhrman?*"

Without warning Aura slides out of the booth.

"*Yes, they would.*"

"Wait, just hear me out . . ."

But Aura is already strolling casually over to the television set, where she bends down to tug briefly at the power cord, killing the broadcast. An enormous silence quiets the bar. For what feels like an eternity—five, eight, nine seconds—she stands there, hands on hips, staring down the patrons. She's the only African American in the place and, aside from Ingrid, the only woman.

As she makes her way back to the booth Aura's heels clap a hollow clop upon the sawdusted hardwoods. She falls back into

her seat.

“Do you believe in evil?”

“I think evil is a failure of understanding,” Dean says.

“I didn’t ask what you think.”

Dean pulls at his neck, loosening the tension clamped along his spine.

“I believe in . . . no. I believe there are evil acts. I believe they happen when people focus on their differences instead of their similarities. But I don’t believe there are evil, inherently, people.”

“Well I sure as hell do. And I want to hear how evil people are reconciled into this kinder, gentler worldview of yours.”

“In, again, a perfect world . . .”

“Jesus Christ, Dean. You sound like a trailer for a B movie.”

“Let me finish. Because in a perfect world I could justify killing Billy. In a place where nobody lied and we understood not just the facts but the truth of every case beyond a shadow of a doubt. Because what this kid has done is horrible, Aura.”

The bar banter is picking back up.

“But people are people,” Dean says, “and people aren’t perfect. Evidence gets manufactured. Eyewitnesses make mistakes, prosecutors bend the rules because they’re just absolutely certain *this* guy is their killer. People lie to get on a jury, people lie from the witness stand, people lie to seem smarter or stronger or better than they really are. They lie to themselves about their biases, which is the most insidious kind of lying there is. And innocent men die for crimes they haven’t done.”

“Billy Grimes isn’t innocent.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters,” she pokes herself violently in the chest, “to me.”

“You’re trusting a bunch of guys who put on masks when they get dressed for work in the morning. A man wears a mask because he has something to hide. I know a little about this, Aura. A bank robber wears a mask. A rapist wears a mask. The KKK…”

“Did you really just say KKK?”

“There’s a double standard at work here. You’ll see, what, hundreds of pictures in this trial? Pictures of Carl’s dead and bloated body. Pictures of discrete wounds. Bloodstains and bodily fluids and weapons and hemorrhages. But you’ll never see a picture of someone gasping for air in the death chamber. You won’t see a picture of the guy that swallows his tongue or shits himself or takes forty-seven horrible moaning minutes to die because they punched through a vein and injected the poison into his soft tissue. The guy whose head explodes because one of the executioners was drunk and forgot to wet the sponge in his electric chair. Oops. The guy who’s allergic to the cocktail, his convulsions so intense he snaps his spine like a twig, even with the restraints.”

Aura begins clapping. Slowly, ironically.

“You talk as though you have it all figured out. Righteous Mr. Goodnight against the whole jury-rigged system. Everybody and nobody is responsible.”

“The court wants you to believe the responsibility for Carl’s murder lies solely with Billy Grimes. But it won’t own up to the murder it’s about to commit. It wants you to believe this is as routine as putting the kids down for a nap. But it’s a premeditated, a cold-blooded, a deceptive kind of killing. And you’re being recruited into it.”

“There’s a big glaring error in your logic, Tonto. If everyone is responsible on the other side, who’s responsible on yours?”

“My boss.”

Aura jabs the tabletop with her index finger. “One person.”

“He’s the one making the argument.”

“And why is that? You aren’t smart enough? You’re an Indian, just like this Grimes guy. You apparently understand him better than this Wolfman fellow. Sound pretty convincing to me. So why hasn’t Dean taken the trouble to get that law degree? Find out if he has the chops to save some of these poor wayward souls?”

She has caught him out, seen into Dean, the way he does his clients.

“I’ll tell you why.” She points the finger at his chest. “Because you’re too scared to argue one of these cases.”

“Don’t get back in that witness box with an agenda, Aura. Or . . .”

“You don’t want the responsibility that comes with losing.”

His hands are shaking under the table.

“What are you going to do?”

“You keep asking me that.”

“You keep not answering.”

She lifts her shot glass. “To answers.”

They toast.

“Answers come cheap,” Dean says. “To understanding.”

About *The Midnight Man* (Tyrus Books/Simon & Schuster 2017)

Oklahoma, 1994. The Waco siege is over; the OJ trial isn't.

Dean Goodnight, the first Choctaw Indian employed by the Oklahoma County public defender's office, pulls a new case—the brutal murder of a once-promising basketball star. The only witness is Caleb, the five-year-old son of the prime suspect. Investigating the murder, Dean draws four strangers into his client's orbit, each of whom becomes deeply involved in the case—and in Caleb's fate.

There's Aura Jefferson, the victim's sister, a proud black nurse struggling with the death of her brother; Aura's patient Cecil Porter, a bigoted paraplegic whose own dreams of playing professional basketball were shattered fifty years ago; Cecil's shady brother, the entrepreneur and political manipulator "Big" Ben Porter; and Ben's wife Becca, who uncovers a link between the young Caleb and her own traumatic past.

As the trial approaches, these five are forced to confront their deepest disappointments, hopes, and fears. And when tragedy strikes again, their lives are forever entwined.

THE MIDNIGHT MAN is filled with joyful, vividly drawn details from the basketball games serving as backbeat to the story. With great compassion and grace, author David Eric Tomlinson explores the issues underpinning one of the most dramatic events in our recent history.

David Eric Tomlinson.
Photo Credit: Cadence Tomlinson.

About David Eric Tomlinson

David Eric Tomlinson was born and raised in Oklahoma. He grew up in the manufacturing town of Perry, where, in April of 1995, one hour and eighteen minutes after detonating a truck bomb that killed one hundred and sixty-eight people, domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh was apprehended. David earned an undergraduate degree in creative writing from the University of California, San Diego, and has worked as an illustrator, copywriter, art director, web designer, usability consultant, product manager, Kenpo karate instructor, and stay-at-home dad. David lives in Dallas, Texas with his wife and two daughters. ***THE MIDNIGHT MAN*** is his first novel.

Such Modest Proposals, And So Many

Most schoolchildren in the English-speaking West read Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in high school or college. Since its publication in 1729, *A Modest Proposal* has become a staple of English literature, the most recognizable satirical example of hyperbole. *A Modest Proposal* is often read by students of history, politics, and economics for similar reasons. It is a genre unto itself—the "modest proposal" essay—and is treated as such in many online media publications (Salon, Slate, Jezebel, TNR, The National Review, and… well, all of them, irrespective of political alignment).

John Swift, proposer of modest proposals (Wikipedia Commons)

For those people who missed Swift's original satire, here's a quick summary. In the early 18th century (really from the 17th-20th century), the Irish, colonized and exploited by England, suffered from extreme poverty. Meanwhile, a growing overseas empire and industrialization helped expand the British middle class, and drove appetite for consumer goods. Swift offers a solution to both issues—the middle class should cultivate an appetite for the flesh of Irish babies, which will alleviate the suffering of poor Irish families.

A Modest Proposal is not modest, nor is it sincere. Swift does not expect people reading it to take his argument at face value, though it is likely that he earnestly hoped his writing would help raise awareness and empathy for poor Irish civilians. The type of person (a person like Swift's fictional narrator) who would suggest developing a market for baby flesh—breaking humanity's taboo on cannibalism for sustenance, satisfaction, or profit—would be an immoral monster. But Swift's ambition isn't simply to shock with *A Modest Proposal*, he designs the essay to deliver horror logically, to examine a particular way of thinking about problem solving. The essay derives much of its power through fusing "thinkable" (the expansion of markets and generation of wealth as a way of alleviating human suffering) with "unthinkable" (that market expansion, in *A Modest Proposal*, is Irish babies).

Because *A Modest Proposal* communicates its point so effectively, it is widely emulated. A favorite of New York Times Op-Ed columnists and contributors, (as well as bloggers) and many other media publications (as described ealier), the "Modest Proposal" of today is (unlike its inspiration), often quite modest in terms of its ambitions, and respect for the sensibilities of English-language readers. These not-immodest contemporary proposals have lost almost all connection to the original sense of Swift's intentionally outrageous essay, and function simply as a way of grabbing readers' attention. They're a kind of bait-and-switch, where naming the essay in a

way sure to draw parallels to Swift's essay serves as the "bait," and a justification for maintaining the status quo is the "switch."

- Writers propose modestly, today, when writing modest proposals

One (out of countless) example of a failed "modest proposal" directly inspired by Swift is this Obama-era 2010 think piece that whimsically offered to improve U.S. intelligence-gathering efforts by firing everyone in the CIA and replacing them with out-of-work investigative journalists. Elements shared with Swift's *Modest Proposal*: (1) offers to solve two social problems in one stroke, (2) is an unethical and bad idea, (3) clearly forwarded for rhetorical impact rather than as a serious suggestion. Elements it lacks: (1) offers some truly transgressive idea for the sake of exaggeration, amusement, and illustration [journalists *are* intelligence gatherers, and better at intelligence gathering than the CIA].

Even unconventional proposals (like Noam Chomsky's 2002 "modest" proposal that the U.S. arm Iran and let them attack Iraq) fall short of actually breaking taboo. In the case of Chomsky's satirical essay, a much worse thing happened than the invasion of Iraq by a U.S. supplied Iran—the U.S. invaded Iraq itself, destabilizing the area so completely that open warfare in Iraq is ongoing. In fact, Iran has contributed mightily in the struggle against ISIS, in terms of soldiers and material. Chomsky's vision for possible horror was totally insufficient for the satirical form, and is now a reality in Iraq.

The best or purest recent "modest proposal" to be found is tagged and searchable as a "modest proposal," but not explicitly titled as such. It is a Clinton-era essay from 1999 by David Plotz that proposes to end school shootings by arming all schoolchildren. Plotz doesn't spend the time exploring the

idea—how useful this would be for the gun industry, and (presumably) would assist the U.S. economy in ways that would create more prosperity, thereby reducing the type of family conditions that often lead to dissatisfaction, mental illness, and murder—but it's similar in tone and feel to Swift's satire. It's also pretty close to a stance actually supported by the NRA in the wake of Sandy Hook. Still, a decent attempt.

What's stopping writers and thinkers from going beyond Swift's rhetorical form? It's not as though the world is essentially more just or equitable than in Swift's time—on the contrary, knowing what we do about history, a compelling argument can be made that things are worse now then when Jonathan Swift was writing. Sure, there have been advances in technology and science. There have also been catastrophes on an almost-unimaginable scale, such that if one does not learn about them at school, one is inclined to believe that they are hoaxes. The Great Leap Forward, the Holocaust, Holodomor, the genocide of Native American populations in the Americas, the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons, and many other horrific tragedies of the industrial age required the invention of new legal and ethical categories for which Swift and his contemporaries did not have words.

Granted, Not Everyone is a Satirist

One possible reason so many authors and thinkers invoke *A Modest Proposal* without using the most powerful component of its energy (taboo-busting hyperbole) is that most writers don't consider themselves satirists. They don't write to satirize, they write (a column, for example) to advance a serious policy with serious people. In this case, serious writers could be interested in referencing *A Modest Proposal* to show that they're well-read. They could also hope to use a

portion of *A Modest Proposal*'s energy to highlight the desirability of their position (which is not eating babies) while affiliating the competing argument with calamity.

Here's another factor to consider. Pundits and the political/media commentary class tend to come from the ranks of the wealthy, influential and powerful. This offers an incentive for employees of the wealthy and powerful (those working for Jeff Bezos at *The Washington Post* or the Sulzberger family at *The New York Times*, for example) to be careful with what they write, and how they write it. One will find criticism of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* within their own pages, because those media institutions practice journalism (and do so well). Nevertheless, that criticism rarely takes on a *disrespectful* tone, or one that is strident or moralistic. There are limits.

The Sulzbergers are great patrons of the Democratic Party, and (an assessment based on regular readership of *The New York Times*) tend to pull for mainstream icons of the Democratic Party including the Clintons and the Kennedys—political families accustomed to chummy relationships with large media organizations. This is just one prominent example from an industry rife with patronage and nepotism, on both sides of the political spectrum. Nepotism and favor happens to be visible to many people who keep track of politics or consume journalism in a way that it isn't visible in physics or rocket science. Nepotism and favor are also differently useful in politics and journalism. When a political or authorial brand passes from one generation to the next, having a prominent father or mother who can parlay influence into access can make or break a young career in either. Is it any wonder that within two groups who depend on each other for power there tends to be little incentive to write hard-hitting satire that might undermine the position of either?

Social media also makes bold satire difficult by particularizing audiences, and opening satirists up to

personal attacks (as well as the potential consequences of those attacks). Although satire is not supposed to care about being criticized, certain topics cannot be satirized without being criticized as offensive. There is a higher standard for satire today, that takes more into account than an essay's subject (for example, the author's personal connection to the topic at hand). Besides, media institutions can be destroyed by the wealthy and powerful.

The final criticism of *A Modest Proposal* and similar satires could be that hyperbole as a rhetorical device has been overcome by the horrors of the 20th century. Satire, no matter how well-intentioned and effectively written has yet to prevent the worst human impulses. From this perspective, if satire isn't effective, maybe it's better not to write it.

But I'd tend to disagree with that idea. Here's an example I wrote of a satirical piece that emulates the intent behind Swift's argument in *A Modest Proposal* without imitating the structure. In this case, a man seeks to assuage his fears about terrorism, and in so doing, becomes a terrorist. As a matter of course, the piece (built as a how-to) describes terrorist activity. It's not great satire, but neither is it awful—and certainly on par with, say, most of what passes for satire in mainstream media today outside Clickhole and The Onion. If it were to go viral and be read by everyone in the U.S., would fewer people become terrorists? Maybe!

Or, to put that better—if it were good enough to go viral, it would almost certainly have a deterrent effect against domestic terrorism, because that's what great satire does, it makes bad but appealing ideas clichéd, it exposes the ephemerally attractive as flawed and stupid. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clever mockery can do more to make an argument against a given issue or idea stickier and more effective than earnest straightforward appeals. Common sense suggests the same.

Ultimately, what does it matter if satire is ineffective or inefficient? Who said efficiency was the standard of value? Probably a British capitalist eating Irish babies.

Writers Invoking *A Modest Proposal* Should Be Less Modest

Without innovative, bold, confrontational writing, satire ends up excusing unethical or hypocritical behavior. It is satire's job to attack the status quo in those ways that the status quo has grown oppressive to humans—regardless of whether or not that attack is successful. Selectively, yes, and constructively, satirists and writers hoping to improve society must do so sometimes through offensive and/or provocative literature.

Absent real satire, the landscape for substantive discussion shrinks until it has been reduced to two agreeable gentlefolk bowing before one another, respectfully begging one anther's pardon for being so bold as to ask whether the other might be willing to favor them by proceeding through yonder open door.

A Modest Proposal is not extreme, save in comparison with almost all of its recent published descendants. That there are fewer sincere satirical calls for evaluation in political, social, or economic terms at the same time that there are many essays pretending to do so is a commentary on the general comfort many well-educated people feel with the status quo. It's also a comment on how effective publishing has become at supporting writing that most people find satisfying. That's almost as bad as a President Trump. And not quite as bad as raising Irish babies to feed the aesthetic tastes of the affluent.

Noble Accounts: American War Stories, American Mothers, and Failed American Dreams

In the social history of our country, the current cultural moment may seem particularly conducive to division, denial and fear. But in his 1962 essay “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” James Baldwin exposes what he sees as a specifically American character trait: panic at the idea that our dreams have failed, and the complacency that “so inadequately masks [this] panic.” Discussing the great American novelists up to the time of his writing, he elaborates: “all dreams were to have become possible here. This did not happen. And the panic… comes out of the fact that we are not confronting the awful question of whether or not all our dreams have failed… How have we managed to become what we have, in fact, become? And if we are, as indeed we seem to be, so empty and so desperate, what are we to do about it?” In life, as in fiction, this is an incendiary question.

Baldwin posits that “the effort to become a great novelist simply involves attempting to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.” Living as we now do in what some deem a post-truth society, would a novelist hewing to Baldwin’s definition be noble or naïve?

Acknowledging the prominence of war literature in the American canon, Baldwin takes issue with those who idolize the giants— Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Faulkner— and complain that the younger generation doesn’t live up to their legacy. “It is

inane…" he says, "to compare the literary harvest of World War II with that of World War I—not only because we do not, after all, fight wars in order to produce literature, but also because the two wars had nothing in common."

As Michael Carson discussed on this site, Sam Sacks, in *Harper's*, lately took up the question of war literature and the prominence of the first person account. In "First-Person Shooters: What's Missing in Contemporary War Fiction," Sacks echoed Baldwin's characterization of the American public as complacent, pointing out that the tendency to praise modern war writing "ennobles the account while deploring the event." Returning soldiers, attempting to process or at least to share their experiences through literature, are met with a "disconnected," "distractable" public. In Phil Klay's much-praised *Redeployment*, Sacks observes, "redemption seems to rely on a shared incomprehension of what exactly [the Terror Wars] were about."

Does incomprehension, then, become the only thing the narrator and the reader have in common? It is personal experience that gives soldier-writers the authority to attempt to write about war, but it is also this very experience that distances them from their audience.

Sacks takes issue with soldiers' personal accounts as literature. Citing an argument by Eric Bennett, he says, "Nearly all recent war writing has been cultivated in the hothouse of creative-writing programs. No wonder so much of it looks alike." (I would argue that there's something of a post hoc fallacy here, and point out that given the opportunity to use the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, veterans already inclined toward writing might understandably choose to go for an arts degree that would otherwise seem impractical and/or financially out of reach.)

Sacks asks, "What might the novel be capable of—aesthetically and politically—if it broke out of its obsessively curated

pigeonholes of first-person experience?" While this is a tantalizing question, some of the best fictional portraits of twentieth-century Americans were necessarily based on such specific "pigeonholes," isolated as the characters were by madness, geography, oppression, alienation, or a host of other factors. This was true not only for soldiers, but for women in various circumstances, notably that of the "desperate housewife". This hyper-personal view through which we filtered literature over the last century paved the way for current trends; some dismiss the primacy of first-person accounts, others criticize the rise of "identity politics," and the cult of the individual perhaps enforces our general cultural narcissism. Certainly the legacy of individuality, while containing elements we can be proud of, contributed to the rise of social media as both useful tool and scourge (depending on who you're talking to). We hurtle insults; we troll each other; the more civilized and less anonymous among us agree to disagree. Maybe, as Baldwin implied, what unites us is our shared panic.

Failed dreams and illusions littered the ground in mid-twentieth century America. In *Fifth Avenue, 5 a.m.: Audrey Hepburn, Breakfast at Tiffany's, and the Dawn of the Modern Woman*, Sam Wasson observes: "With an unprecedented degree of leisure time, and more media access than ever before, the Fifties woman was the single most vulnerable woman in American history to the grasp of prefab wholesale thought, and by extension, to the men who made it." These living Barbies in their gilded cages, straining against intellectual stultification, lead us to a generation of characters like Maria in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* and, much later, Betty Draper in Matt Weiner's *Mad Men*. In one episode of that show, a newly divorced mother moves to the suburbs and is regarded as an alien for, among other infractions, taking long aimless walks. "Where are you going?" a housewife asks, seething with disdain and suspicion.

Didion's Maria is nearly incapacitated by "the unspeakable peril in the everyday… In the whole world there was not as much sedation as there was instantaneous peril." This is reminiscent of stories of American soldiers in Vietnam, getting stoned out of their minds or slipping into heroin to numb their terror. Maria lives during the same era, but rather than being on her belly in a jungle, or marching in Mississippi facing down guns, riot gear, and water hoses, she is in L.A. on a vast freeway of loneliness, surrounded by drugs, vapidity and self-deception. After her husband leaves her, she sleeps near the pool, though sleeping outdoors strikes her as the "first step toward something unnameable." Hers is a very specific and isolated terror, perhaps even its own type of war. Can one human being's abject fear of annihilation be distinguished from another's? As readers, we may become irritated by the overly personal account, especially when the speaker is perceived as privileged, selfish, or narcissistic. But, says Baldwin, "What the writer is always trying to do is utilize the particular in order to reveal something much larger and heavier than any particular can be." Sacks thinks recent war writing has it backward, trying to shoehorn the universal into the particular: "The public's unprecedented disconnection from the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan—wars waged by a volunteer army and funded with borrowed money—has made it all the more eager to genuflect before the writing that has emerged from these conflicts. As if in response to this public appetite for artistic redemption, veterans have been producing stories of personal struggle that are built around abstract universal truths, stories that strive to close the gap between soldier and civilian."

Lucia Berlin's Korean War-era story, "Lead Street, Albuquerque," depicts a brilliant young artist who avoids military orders by getting his new wife pregnant. After she has the baby, his wife—another Maria—gazes out of the hospital window and smiles, saying, "How come nobody ever talks about

this? About dying or being born?”

The next war, Vietnam, would be the first “television war,” and there would then be plenty of talk about dying. But unlike the men his age who are sent to be killed, Maria’s husband, who “hated the baby’s smells,” is above such earthbound matters. (Except, of course, when having sex with his mistress, as he was doing when the baby was born). At the end of the story, the artist abandons Maria when she informs him that she is pregnant again. He leaves behind his rare, caged birds, which Maria gives to a neighbor. The story could be read as a sly take on McCarthy-era fear of artists and bohemians as morally corrupt and un-American, or it could stand on its merits as a depiction of one woman’s reality.

Berlin tells, in an indirect way, a woman’s experience (or non-experience) of a war. Where, I wonder, is the great American “spouse left behind during wartime” novel? The great one written by a female veteran? Sacks reminds us that “There are more than 200,000 women on active duty in the military, but the female experience of warfare has barely been broached.”

What does it mean for our cultural conceptions of “big ticket items” like war, morality, and artistic authority that we live in a country with a long history of women’s voices being silenced? This history strengthens the case for the centrality of personal experience in fiction. Still, Sacks’s characterization makes sense. We, the somatized public, are supposedly at a safe remove from the dangers of war, praising the accounts of those who return without having to comprehend their realities or condone the act of war itself. “Ennobl[ing] the account while deploring the event.”

It strikes me that we do the opposite with certain women’s experiences. Mothering, for example. The “mommy wars”, in fact, have this as a basic tenet: motherhood is an inherently noble pursuit, the most important job you’ll ever have, etc.

ad nauseam, but you're doing it wrong. Here is a kind of symmetry; men can't physically experience childbirth, and women have not—historically, officially-—been able to experience combat.

Baldwin said that "The multiple truths about a people are revealed by that people's artists—that is what the artists are for." This is interesting, given Berlin's antagonist artist character, obviously not the kind of artist Baldwin was thinking of. Or perhaps he was including such nasty characters? Maybe our dreams have failed: the American dream of what it is to be a mother, an artist, a soldier, a reader, a citizen. Perhaps they have failed because no American is able to fit these notions as neatly as we would like, now or ever. Baldwin also called this nation one "in which words are mostly used to cover the speaker, not to wake him up." Is panic and its attendant complacency surprising in a country where your youth doesn't belong to you, nor your body, your time with a new baby, or your privacy? And why shouldn't our fiction reflect our personal experiences of these failed dreams?

Poetry: "Nostos" by T. Mazzara

Photo by Lance Cpl. MaryAnn Hill

i. the deadweight of a crooked hook

we crossed any strange boundary in our youths. all amongst some hitch in what aught-wise (or maddenin) might normally be tattooed the standard trajectory of a set, masculine life. unvigorous, but then: the word appropriate means the same as mediocre. pretend studs, almost in-step, fat ⁒ nasty no-names mistakin stiffness for bearin. ⁒ anon on prints of warnin paint. warrin paint. the same color as cowardice. the same shape as the souls what's glued to the bottom our go-fasters. choked back inglorious tears whilst some anonymous civilian, some nasty-ass non-rate, who's better'n us (ever-body better'n us), gripped our slow nogs ⁒ used a dull set of clippers to scrape our empty pates as bare ⁒ bumpy as dead stones or pinging, spoonless, hand grenades arced toward fulfilment. ⁒ we gots ourselves poplar pants, but they ain't pants no more, them's trousers ⁒ they's medium reg, like we's come to ken our dicks is medium reg thanks to bein told so at decibel. they smelt new like us. new before the smokies got them clubbed mitts, the size'a halteres, deep in our guts ⁒ twisted. what kinda fuckin faggot wears a blouse? a query. landed faster'n what's a country? borders? them lines ain't shit but bloody illusions drawn in the sand with dead an'en marked by colored fabric. how could we know patriot might well means the same as a narrow mind, but also might mean diomedes. we can't know that. not that. not what imperialism tastes like (corned beef hash). not what consequences smell like (bad apples ⁒ human shit). certainly not while some leather-faced smokey is spittin agro to get in line for chow now, cover now ⁒ align to the right. breathe in that coffee ⁒ coffin nail breath, his halitosis insides, his hard grit ⁒ his life seemin harder still. that stale tobacco, ⁒ man. he's yellin again. why the hell is he yellin again? all so funny to me, but i never smile. i's secret grinnin somewhere hid from all my non-buddies ⁒ all them bosses. i know the deal. i know the fuckin deal. i grew up with the deal. all them e-g-a tattoos ⁒ meat

tags at the zero club pool ϰ e-club pool. get on my quarterdeck, push now, ϰ side-straddle hop now, push now. side. straddle. hop. ϰ get the fuck off my quarterdeck. get the fuck off my fuckin quarterdeck.

ii. κλέος ϰ νόστος

we was all after hittin a piece of paper downrange. a mob of bolts flyin back. ϰ goddamn if i wasn’t in love with pinchin that slick trigger. worn smooth by other men’s (boy’s) caresses. i groped her long lines ϰ all that warm when i made her go off. my dearest. my colleen. it weren’t all fucks ϰ blowjobs though. sometimes i failed to give her proper attention. like i missed them trainin me to rapid fire, cuz (near enough for me to see) there was this grasshopper chewin on a leaf of clover like it was his last fuckin meal. focused on that instead of listenin to the pith helmet barkin instructions. yeahyeahyeah. got the general gist that we’s supposed to squeeze that pulsin trigger a bunch of times real fast. when she went off, she kicked a little. though they told us not to, thumbed her into burst just to see if the devil would appear. he didn’t. so i clicked her back to semi. but then wasn’t payin attention when they taught us how to tie a hasty sling cuz a pale paper butterfly decided to tic her hairy feet gainst colleen’s front site post. threesome. nice. nothin means nothin. shot expert. up inside my colleen. but not all did. those most in love with touchin that delicate clit. those most in love with the idea of murder with impunity. i suppose. i’s wrong. we moved on. cease·fire, cease·fire, cease·fire.

iii. bad apples ϰ human shit

our lot. sometimes we found ourselves sawin aggregate with dune-shaped skin on our palms, like rolled wales on a grounded ship beside the atlantic. that remembered firth. only

remembered cuz it weren’t there. that remembered us. those slips. those lappings ⁒ rage. foam ⁒ weather. over there. over where? sensed ⁒ yearned. smelled, maybe. ⁒ we wiped that same wet salt from fore to clean-shaven jawbone ⁒ flicked a spray gainst the loam, ⁒ greens, ⁒ dust, ⁒ olivine, as we handled awkward entrenchin tools under hot-ass darkness ⁒ still a threat of rain, like some mofo green god what’s born in a distant country was gonna come over ⁒ blanket us in cool water. only, just like the devil, he also never showed. we. erect, or bent. thrust fuckin fightin holes en un humedal, en la vieja florida. this earthen bed, these layers. the frogs built this place. then los españoles. ⁒ god, ever swingin dick dissemblin our mom-fuckin father’s fetishized imagination of what tough must be. ⁒ all whilst we was shattered to pieces twixt kleos ⁒ nostos ⁒ there is the covert knowin home was always the better choice. my nostos has perished, but my kleos will be unwilting. foreals tho: we’s all just pansies in the groundwork, down to our heels. our youths in hard-on blossom. but—no homo.

iv. love with the idea of murder

we humped. god, we humped. march. run. march ⁒ run. that accordion behavior of a ruck run. with alice on our backs ⁒ l-b-e ⁒ mags ⁒ full canteens. ⁒ we became individuals when one amongst us shit his pants cuz he was too afraid to ask for a head call. we grateful for the break afforded us as them smokies took shitpants off the dirt path ⁒ did godknowswhat to him out past the treeline. we breathed ⁒ drank water ⁒ thought of her at the end of the line. goin again. run, motherfucker, run. we was troubled dissimulators all, uncolored, uncouth, middlin claimants to whichever (sweet) mary jane (rottencrotch) we might once have seen. smoked. once. upon a time or actual. then clutchin our shafts, cuz we too are afraid to ask for a head call, we hear ⁒ agree with the smokies that we is “out there” ⁒ double-timin whilst we “waitin for scotty come beam [us] the fuck up,”—up, up—out

some godawful, risin regret: ewe signed the muthafuckin contract, brother. we’s in-step now, clenched in vigor, all together: a single, strainin, sweatin, fist—We—forty inches back to chest. so says that make-shift swagger stick, that cut-off broom handle taped 𝓍 tapped in time gainst steamin cement til, together, we all trek, bangin heels gainst bitumen blacktop, then out—out 𝓍 through dun salt—salt 𝓍 sandy basins, out amongst sallow pines 𝓍 up in this undeveloped estuary, no sign of civilization anywhere beside the red brick lines of covered 𝓍 aligned bully buildins 𝓍 all them pressed uniforms. by the end, we, all us, ever swinginfuckindick, would fuck our mothers 𝓍 off our fathers (we learned how in hittin skills 𝓍 on the bayonet course) to wear that scratchy blue tunic, to be diomedes, or don them crossed rifles, or the auric fuckin parrot grippin that big, dirty ball we been stompin over for months, that mud globe what’s stabbed through 𝓍 through with the deadweight of a crooked hook. a small bit of metal what could stop a ship. but what hook ain’t crooked? doing exactly what it’s meant to. we column left 𝓍 align right 𝓍 stand at parade rest as moms 𝓍 dads (who can’t know we’d kill em just soon look at em) cheer 𝓍 applaud our crossin the shadow-line. we’s dismissed in the heat, in our blue deltas, in our spit-shined leather dress. we’s discarded for a week’s leave, like droppin’a handful of sharpened crow’s feet on the blacktop, about an hour north’a zabana.